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ABSTRACT

Formal grammar study is important in schools above the elementary level because it can lead to improved understanding of the nature and functions of language. Although newer grammars, based on structural linguistics and transformational-generative grammar, have not met the needs of the schools, their potential should not be ignored with a return to traditional grammar. Instead, concepts from various grammars can form an eclectic grammar based on a unified theoretical system in which the output (sentences as well as graphic and other linguistic forms of expression) results from the appropriate syntactic and phonological elements supplied by the operative and expressive components. (The text includes a diagram of the theoretical model.) (JM)

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SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW--AN ECLECTIC GRAMMAR FOR LEARNERS

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The question of what grammar we should teach has to be answered in the context of at least two related questions. The first and more basic of these two questions is: Should we teach grammar in the schools? My answer, in a word, is yes. The second question is: Why should we teach grammar? It is obvious that more than one word is required to answer that question.

Various reasons have been offered for teaching grammar in the schools, many of them related to claims about the value of grammar as a means of improving abilities in reading, writing, and speaking. Research evidence has not supported these claims; but they have persisted, and in the current effort to get back to basics many teachers are re-emphasizing the least attractive aspects of grammar study. Apparently, the assumption is that nothing is more basic than the parts of speech. Since many students aren't doing very well without grammar, I suppose these teachers hope (despite past experience to the contrary) that a detailed study of grammar will enable their students to do better.

My own reasons for teaching grammar are not so utilitarian. I can conceive of students arriving at a fairly high level of literacy without benefit of conscious knowledge of grammar, and I doubt that such knowledge directly contributes much to those who become highly literate. I prefer to justify the teaching of grammar on the grounds that since all of us use language, we ought to have some conscious understanding of what language is and how it works. Perhaps such understanding may occasionally result in improved ability to use language effectively. If so, I would be pleased; but I would not depend on that as a justification for teaching grammar.

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There are other important questions related to the question of what grammar we should teach; one of them is the question of when to teach grammar. I shall not attempt to answer that question here, but I wish to say in passing that I see no reason for emphasizing formal study of grammar in the elementary grades. There are other kinds of language-learning activities that are much more important during the early years in school.

My answers to these related questions provide the necessary context for my answer to the main question under discussion here. I think we should teach grammar, not because it will necessarily result in improved facility with language, but because it can result in improved understanding of the nature and functions of language. Thus it follows that the kind of grammar we should teach is the kind of grammar that will best enable the learner to understand what language is and how it works.

Having said that, I am aware of the obligation to say more about what I think such a grammar should be like. All grammars deal with the workings of the language system, and all provide some insights into the structure of language. Furthermore, each grammar deals more effectively with some aspects of language than the other grammars do. If some way could be found to pick the best features of various grammars and blend them together in a unified whole, the result would be an eclectic grammar of maximum value to teachers and learners.

The idea of an eclectic grammar is obviously not new. It has often been suggested, and efforts have been made to devise such a grammar. Perhaps the less-than-satisfactory results of such efforts should be discouraging, but I think it is possible in the light of recent developments in linguistic theory to make a better school grammar than is now available.

The shortcomings of traditional school grammar have been pointed out many times, and it seems unnecessary to reiterate them here. In spite of those

deficiencies, however, traditional grammar was the only grammar known to several generations of teachers; and if the question of what grammar we should teach had to be decided by teachers in a referendum, traditional grammar would probably receive a majority of the votes cast. For one thing, the fact that traditional grammar has a fairly stable terminology gives it an advantage over more recently developed grammars.

Structural linguistics was perceived by many linguists and teachers to be a desirable alternative to traditional grammar. It seemed to provide a more accurate description of English structure, and probably would have become established in the schools if the advent of transformational-generative grammar had been delayed a few years.

Transformational-generative grammar was obviously superior in many ways to the other grammars; and although its originators never recommended it for use in the schools, it was incorporated into several textbooks. There are at least two reasons why this grammar has not succeeded in the schools: (1) it was put in the textbooks before its theoretical base was fully developed and stabilized; (2) teachers were expected to teach it without having adequate preparation. With the succession of revisions of theory and the lack of understanding on the part of many teachers, there was hardly a chance for transformaticnal-generative grammar to be accepted in the schools.

Although the newer grammars have not met the needs of the schools, it would be tragic if we ignored the potential of these grammars and went back to traditional school grammar. A desirable alternative, it seems to me, is to draw concepts from the various grammars to formulate an eclectic grammar for use in the schools.

An obvious hindrance to the formulation of a satisfactory eclectic grammar is the difficulty of establishing a unified theoretical base. Drawing together

parts of various grammars entails the risks that some parts will not fit and that some gaps will exist where no suitable part can be found. This is no small problem, but I do not see it as insurmountable. In an initial effort to solve part of the problem, I have proposed certain modifications and revisions of linguistic theory (O'Donnell, 1975). A summary of the proposed system follows.

The distinction Chomsky (1965) made between deep structure and surface structure seems to be an important distinction, and I would make a similar distinction in an eclectic grammar. I would, however, redefine the syntactic, semantic, and phonological components of Chomsky's grammar. To reflect the idea that semantic structure is more basic than syntactic structure, I would identify a basal component composed of semantic units. Semantic structures generated by the basal component would be syntactically encoded by means of an operative component and phonologically or graphically encoded by means of an expressive component. The structured entity underlying an overt sentence I would call a semantic construct.

I accept the position of Fillmore (1968) that the grammatical notion of case deserves a place in the base component of grammar. In his view, the base structure of a sentence consists of a verb and one or more noun phrases, and each noun is associated with the verb in a particular case relationship. He names two constituents of base structure: modality, which includes negation, tense, mood, and aspect; and proposition, which is a tenseless set of relationships involving verbs, nouns, and embedded sentences. I agree with Fillmore that an underlying set of caselike relations needs to be specified. Since relations can best be defined by the roles of related elements, I would include role as a semantic unit.

I assume that the view of semantic structure presented by Chafe (1970) is essentially correct, but I would make some changes in terminology and perhaps

in theoretical concepts. Chafe takes the position that a sentence is built around a predicative element, usually accompanied by one or more nominal elements. These elements are reflected in verbs and nouns. Chafe assumes that the human conceptual universe is dichotomized initially into the two major areas represented by these two kinds of elements. The area of the verb embraces states and events, and the area of the noun embraces things. Since the verb determines what the rest of the sentence is like, he assumes that the verb is central and the nouns peripheral.

In the proposed eclectic grammar, I would identify the input for linguistic encoding at the perceptual level. At the basal linguistic level, perceived events and states would be encoded as semantic constructs. With appropriate syntactic and phonological elements supplied by the operative and expressive components, the output at the overt level would be sentences.

Constructs generated by the basal component would consist of a modality index and a proposition. Assertions, queries, requests, suppositions, etc. would be distinguished from one another by the modality index, which would also distinguish negation from affirmation, non-continuing from continuing operations, and non-current from current states and events. The proposition would consist of related basal constituents and their respective semantic roles. The relations of the constituents would be defined by their respective roles. Basal constituents would include the subconstructs underlying certain kinds of phrases and clauses, as well as the semantic entities underlying words.

Roles that might occur in constructs encoding states include attribute, classification, nomination, and possessor. These roles accompany basal constituents underlying words referring respectively to qualities, classes, names, and "owners" of things. The semantically neutral role of object would occur in constructs encoding non-ambient states and certain kinds of events.

Constructs encoding events might have as central role either process or action, or they might have a role combining process and action. The process role would be associated with change of state and the action role with activity. Something perceived as undergoing a change of state would have patient role; the initiator of activity would have agent role.

Presumably, an adequate list of roles would permit formulation of a set of generative rules. These rules might take the following form:

1. Construct $\dashrightarrow$ Modality + Proposition
2. Proposition $\rightarrow$ { State / Event }
3. State $\dashrightarrow$ { Attribute / Classification / Nomination / Possessor } + Object
4. Event $\dashrightarrow$ { Process + Patient / Action + Agent / Action-process + Patient + Agent }

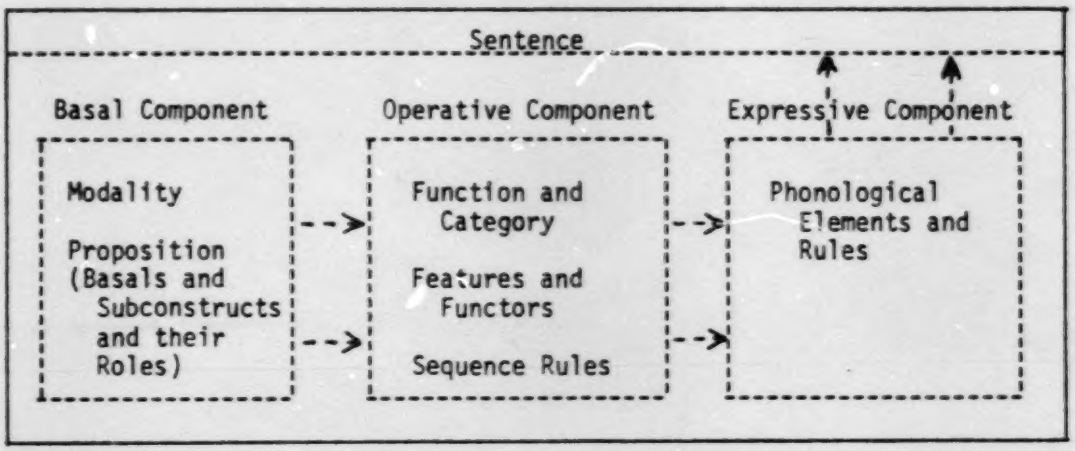
Some sentences that might result from such rules are:

The ball is pretty. (attribute + object)
The ball is a toy. (classification + object)
The thing is a ball. (nomination + object)
The ball is Pat's. (possessor + object)
The baby grew. (process + patient)
The baby walked. (action and agent)
Mother bathed the baby. (action-process + patient + agent)

The operative component would be divided into subcomponents, one of which would assign grammatical functions (subject, predicator, direct object, etc.) to basal constituents and categorize them as nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. Another subcomponent would supply syntactic features and functors. Rules determining sequential order of elements in the sentence would also reside in the operative component.

The expressive component would consist primarily of phonological elements and rules, but it would be viewed broadly enough to include graphic and other forms of linguistic expression.

The relationships of the components to one another and to the overt sentence are illustrated in the following diagram.



Much work would have to be done to translate the theoretical model described above into a school grammar. However, it does appear to possess the essential characteristics needed to provide theoretical unity for an eclectic grammar. Most of the new vocabulary students would need to learn would be associated with the description of the semantic structures. The terminology of traditional grammar, supplemented with a few terms from structural linguistics, is adequate to describe the operative component. Existing terms for pronunciation and spelling can serve for description of the expressive component.

I think such a grammar could be developed to serve the needs of our students. It might not take exactly the form I have proposed, but I am convinced that an eclectic grammar similar to the one I have suggested is needed for use in the schools.

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